

Farewell to Levon Helm

by Peter Stone Brown

It was in the spring 47 years ago that my brother brought home an album by blues singer John Hammond called *So Many Roads*. It was Hammond's third album and his second with a band. The names of the musicians backing him were unfamiliar, though in the next several months we'd find out who they were. The names as listed on the cover were C.D. Musselwhite, harmonica; Jaime R. Robertson, guitar; Michael Bloomfield, piano; Eric Hudson, organ and Mark Levon Helm on drums. That album served to lead us to the Chicago blues greats, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Jimmy Reed, and many others. The music was loud, maybe even a bit raucous, and there was something about the drums you couldn't help but notice.

About four or five months later, I saw Bob Dylan at Forest Hills Stadium in New York, his first full concert with a band. It was a concert that was every bit as controversial as his more famous appearance the month before at the Newport Folk Festival, and the division in the crowd at times approached riot proportions. In his band that night in addition to Harvey Brooks on bass and Al Kooper on keyboards, were Robbie Robertson on guitar and Levon Helm on drums, though we didn't know that until a few days later since the musicians were never introduced.

About six weeks later, I saw Dylan again in a concert hall in Newark, New Jersey, and the line-up this time was the group, Levon & the Hawks, who a few years later would become known as The Band. I bought a ticket for four bucks the afternoon of the show. The ticket said "stage site." In those days, for sold out shows, people were often seated in folding chairs on the stage itself. When I went back that night, I discovered I had a front row center seat. Folding chairs had been set up over the orchestra pit. The first half of the show was Dylan solo, but after the intermission he came out backed by five very clean cut musicians especially in contrast to Dylan and they roared into "Tombstone Blues." It was loud! There was a line of Fender Showman amps across the stage. And again there was something about the drums, hard-hitting, on purpose.

I carried the sound of that show in my head for a long time. The following spring, one live song was released on the flipside of the single of "I Want You." A few weeks after that single, Dylan had his motorcycle accident, and there was nothing heard either from him or the guys who backed him for a long time. In January of 1968, Dylan returned to the stage at the Woody Guthrie Memorial Concert not

long after the release of *John Wesley Harding*. Backing him were Levon & The Hawks though for that show they might've been called The Crackers. Unfortunately, I didn't get to see that show. The tickets sold out instantly.

Six months later, *Music From Big Pink* was released. On the inside were the names of the musicians, but not what they played. The only place the name "The Band" was found was on the spine of the album jacket. I wrote down the names of the instruments next to their names on the inside cover. *Music From Big Pink* instantly became one of my all time top favorite albums and has stayed there ever since. The music was nothing less than astonishing and to say it changed rock and roll and music is an understatement. The sound was like nothing that had been heard before, yet it echoed a myriad of sounds from blues to gospel to country to folk music and of course rock and roll, and maybe just to show they could do it, there was an almost psychedelic song called "Chest Fever." The sound and feel were old and new at once. In other words timeless. Vocals were tossed around like a basketball. Musicians on both sides of the Atlantic stopped what they were doing in what seemed like a collective, "Hey wait a minute, this is what we should be doing."

The song that instantly received airplay was "The Weight." After an acoustic guitar intro was that drum sound I'd heard in New Jersey three years before. It almost sounded like a folk song, but it wasn't. It had the mystery of a Dylan song, but it wasn't that either. It had a piano run right before the chorus that was irresistible. And the chorus had harmonies that were as old as the hills, and even went into a little bit of barbershop quartet feel. Singing lead in a voice that once you heard it you couldn't forget was Levon Helm. It was a voice uniquely and totally American, and filled with passion and soul. It was in every way real, and had guts and power. It was the voice of a storyteller, yet it had a way of making you feel that there was something more to the story he hadn't told yet. And it was a voice that seemed somehow to magically carry in it the sound of every singer and every song he'd ever heard.

It took almost a year for The Band to appear in concert. Not long after the release of "Big Pink," Rick Danko broke his neck in a car accident. Meanwhile the story of who they were started surfacing in *Rolling Stone* and other music magazines. Four Canadians and one American who came together in the band of Arkansas rockabilly singer Ronnie Hawkins who'd spent most of his career in Canada. Helm joined Hawkins right out of high school, and had been playing rock 'n' roll for almost as long as it had been around.

Finally, in the spring of 1969. The Band played the Fillmore East in New York for two nights. I went the second night. It was a no nonsense show, all about the music. Maybe they said hello and that was it. But there were surprises in store. There were songs that weren't on the album, songs that would appear on their next album, a cover of the Four Tops' "Lovin' You Is Sweeter Than Ever," an encore of Little Richard's "Slippin' and Slidin'," but best of all they switched instruments throughout the show. It was here that I found out that Garth (whose primary instrument was organ) was the piano player on "The Weight." Rick Danko would switch from bass to guitar and fiddle, Richard Manuel would go from piano to the drums and organ. Robbie Robertson played bass, and Levon Helm played both guitar and mandolin. Most important of all, unlike a lot of other bands at the time, they could get the sound they had in the studio onstage.

A few months later, came their second album, *The Band*. It was every way as classic as "Big Pink" and they took things even further. Unlike the first album, every song was original, and the music - well, it was like a crash course in the history American music. Levon Helm took a more prominent role in singing lead on songs that would remain staples of the group's repertoire, "Rag Mama Rag," "Up On Cripple Creek," and the song he was born to sing, "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down."

The second album solidified The Band's reputation as a group totally unique and special. But after that, the cracks started to appear. Their third album *Stage Fright* mined similar territory or tried to, and just wasn't quite as good. Their fourth album *Cahoots*, while having moments and recorded in a studio that was pretty much built for them, sounded dispirited. They did a live album, an experiment with horns that included some rearrangements of earlier songs, then took a break to remerge with an album of old rock and roll covers. Their concerts became louder, and seemed to mostly rely on the songs that had the most airplay. The sense of joy of their earlier shows seemed gone, and the tightness that marked their first couple of years seemed to erode into occasional sloppy playing.

In 1974, they reunited with Bob Dylan for his return to the stage receiving equal billing. The Band played their asses off, but Dylan who kind of shouted his way through the shows often seemed disconnected, becoming engaged mainly on the newer material from *Planet Waves* his first and only complete studio album with The Band.

Their concerts before and after the Dylan tour showed the cracks even more. They could still be great, but Richard Manuel's voice would blow out after a couple of songs and he seemed to have a hard

time keeping it together. The other members would cover for him. They released one more great studio album *Northern Lights-Southern Cross* that had two classics, "Ophelia" sung by Helm, and "It Makes No Difference" sung by Danko.

When it was announced early in the fall of 1976, that The Band would do one final concert, *The Last Waltz* at the site of their concert debut, Winterland, in San Francisco, I was sad, but not surprised.

Levon Helm returned to his first love blues and R&B. He put together a true all-star band with Dr. John, Paul Butterfield, three members of Booker T and the MGs, the RCO All Stars and recorded an album for ABC Records. The album had its moments. Their in-concert debut was at the Tower Theater right outside Philly and sadly close to a disaster. Helm started acting and did memorable roles in *Coal Miner's Daughter* and *The Right Stuff*, where he also served as narrator.

In the 1980s, he recorded three more albums, the best of which was *American Son* on MCA. He'd sometimes tour with his own band, and also did a bunch of memorable acoustic shows with Rick Danko which were a lot of fun. They'd both play guitar with Helm also playing mandolin and harmonica and sang pretty much whatever the hell they felt like singing. In 1983, The Band reformed without Robbie Robertson. At first they included Arkansas Band, the Cate Brothers. It was nice to seem them and they were friendlier and perhaps more outgoing onstage, but a certain intensity the original group had was missing. The Cate Brothers eventually left and they hired guitarist Jim Weider. In 1986, pianist Richard Manuel committed suicide in a hotel room in Florida, but The Band kept on. I saw them a few weeks later, just the four remaining members. The devastation of the loss was clear, but it was one of the best shows I saw the later version of the group do. There were stories that they signed a major label deal, but the album was a long time coming and was finally released on a tiny independent label. The album had its moments, the singing and playing top notch, but only some of the songs held up. Their next album had even less moments.

In 1993, Helm wrote an autobiography *This Wheel's On Fire* co-written with Stephen Davis. It was mostly a great read because as you read, you could hear Helm's voice, the one he narrated *The Right Stuff* with, telling the story. But the book also revealed a deep split with Robbie Robertson. I am not going to go into that here, but it served to divide fans of The Band into two groups. This became very apparent once the Internet became a part of people's lives, and the arguments among Band fans rage on to this day.

The Band recorded one more album, *Jubilation*, probably the best and most cohesive album by the later version of the group. But on some of the tracks it was clear that something was amiss with Helm's remarkable voice. Not long after its release, it was announced Helm was suffering from throat cancer. The following year Rick Danko died suddenly in his sleep. It was the end of The Band.

Helm persevered and survived. He put together a small blues band, The Barn Burners and started playing clubs and bars. But the years, the illness, had taken its toll. Broke from medical expenses, in fact bankrupt, in attempt to save his home and his life, he started putting on concerts in his home studio. The "Midnight Rambles" were a huge success. Soon other musicians such as Emmy Lou Harris and Elvis Costello were playing the Rambles as guest artists. Miraculously, he started to sing again. In 2007, he released [*Dirt Farmer*](#), an acoustic mix of traditional songs with a few by contemporary writers. Yes, his voice was clearly weakened and weathered, but it was a brilliant album and the heart and soul that always marked the best of his work was there in abundance. The album remains easily the best album following the breakup of the original lineup solo or collectively and captured the essence of what both The Band and Helm were about. The album won a Grammy (as did the two after it) and gave Helm long overdue recognition.

Following its release, Helm took the Rambles on the road and I was lucky enough to see them at a show in Philly. It would turn out to be the last time I saw him, and thankfully it was a show to remember, a totally moving experience from the first note to the last. I made sure to get a spot on the floor directly on a line with his drums, so I could watch him play. That night his drumming was beyond brilliant, and I noticed something important, something that says everything about Levon Helm as a musician. He played his most complex stuff on the drums *when he was singing*. That's no easy trick. When the numerous other singers would take the spotlight, he'd hold back and let the vocals shine, always putting the other singers and the song first.

The Rambles and the touring continued, though sometimes Helm would sing less or not sing at all. It seemed all was going well until a few weeks ago when shows were suddenly cancelled and not rescheduled. A few days ago, his family announced that the cancer had recurred and Helm was in his last days. Early this afternoon he died.

For almost 50 years, Levon Helm brought me something that went beyond mere pleasure. He was a musician I loved and admired, in fact a heroic inspiration. The joy his music brought to my life remains incalculable. For that, I can't thank him enough.

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